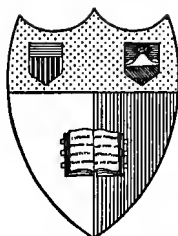


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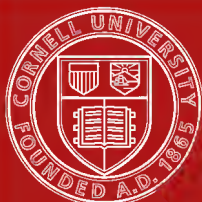
THE GIFT OF
HENRY W. SAGE

1891

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COL. WILLIAM B. MCCREERY
1891.

MY EXPERIENCE
AS A
❧ PRISONER OF WAR ❧
AND ESCAPE FROM
❧ LIBBY PRISON. ❧

BY
WM. B. McCREERY,

Late Colonel 21st Regt. Mich.
Vol. Infantry.

West Michigan Printing Company



Grand Rapids, Mich.

"Should auld acquaintance be forgot
And never brought to min?"

WILLIAM B. McCREERY.

Born at Mt. Morris, New York, 1836,

Died at Flint, Michigan Dec. 9, 1896.

Entered the service of the United States May 25, 1861, as sergeant Company F. 2nd Michigan Infantry, participating with his command in the engagements at Blackburns' Ford, July 18, '61; siege of Yorktown, April 4 to May 4, '62; Williamsburg, Va., May 5, '62; Fair Oaks, May 31st and June 1st, '62; near Richmond, June 18, '62; Glendale, June 30; Malven Hill, July 1st, '62; second Bull Run, August 28-29-30, '62; Chantilly, Sept. 1st, '62.

At the battle of Williamsburg, Va., received three serious wounds, was promoted to rank of captain to date Sept. 10th, 1861. Nov. 20th, 1862, promoted to rank of Lieut. Colonel and transferred to the 21st Michigan Infantry on duty with the Army of the Cumberland, near Nashville, Tennessee. Soon after being assigned the command of the regiment, and as such engaged in the campaign and battle of Stone River, Dec. 26th, '62, to Jan 3, '63. In the winter and spring months of '63 engaged in various marches and light engagements; Colonel February 3rd, 1863, Tullahoma campaign June 24th to Aug. 16th, '63, Chickamauga campaign Aug. 16th to Sept 20th, '63, on which date was seriously wounded

and captured by the enemy. The Colonel thus relates his

"EXPERIENCE AS A PRISONER OF WAR AND
ESCAPE FROM LIBBY PRISON."

IT was my great privilege as an officer with the Twenty-first Michigan Infantry to follow for a time the varying fortunes of the army of the Cumberland. During that period we wielded a more potent weapon than the pen—a musket and a sword. Had I wielded a pen, I could have written my heart out in admiration and love for the fortitude and valor of those loyal soldiers of ours, splendid in doing and grand in suffering.

The struggle at Chickamauga has gone down into history as one of the bloodiest battles of the war, and now that the quiet days have come, men make pilgrimages and women smile again among the mountains of the Cumberland, where this great battle was fought, but they need no guide or protector. Rust has eaten the gun, the graves of the heroes have subsided like waves weary of their troubling. The soldier and his leader have lain down together, but there, embossed upon the globe, Chickamauga, the "River of Death," will continue to flow on, murmuring a quiet requiem to the memory of the heroes who struggled and died there, that the cause for which they fought might live forever, and that "the government of the people, by the people, and for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

It is not my purpose—indeed, it would be impossible for me—to describe this great battle where I was taken prisoner, but rather to narrate in a plain and simple

manner some of my personal experiences while a prisoner of war.

About 5 o'clock on that memorable Sunday afternoon, September 20, 1863, recovering consciousness, I found myself within the rebel lines, three times wounded and unable to move, my dead, dying and wounded comrades lying thick around me. The rebel battalions passing over me in splendid battle array were pressing our retiring forces. A throng of rebel stragglers soon began to make their way to the front. Calling to one of them, I asked, "Will you not give me a drink of water from your canteen? I am very thirsty." He approached me, and I feared at first I had called upon the wrong man, as he seemed wonderfully elated at what he deemed the beginning of the grand march of the Confederate army to Nashville. He finally gave me a drink of water and asked if I had a jack-knife I would give him. Thinking that I should not feel the need of one, at least for some time to come, I told him to put his hand in my pocket and if he could find one he was welcome to it. He found the knife, and from that moment he was my friend.

Fearing that I was seriously wounded, I asked him to see if he could find a surgeon. He left me and soon returned, bringing with him a rebel chaplain, and a stretcher upon which they placed me, and carried me some half mile to the rear, where the wounded of both armies were being collected. The chaplain was very kind and after a little time, with some assistance, placed me upon his horse, taking me almost two miles farther to the rear to a place he designated as their hospital

headquarters, which proved to be nothing more nor less than an apple orchard containing some eight or ten acres.

I was deposited under an apple tree on the bare ground, with no covering, and told to make myself as comfortable as possible, and after receiving what I supposed to be good rebel advice from the chaplain, and a hearty "God bless you" from my newly-made rebel soldier friend, I was left to my own thoughts.

It was now after dark, and I began to feel as though something real good to eat would not be objectionable. A wounded Union soldier soon came to me, whom I asked to get me water and something to eat. He left me for that purpose, soon returning with water—I thought the best I had ever drank—and two ears of corn, saying he was very sorry, but he could find nothing else to eat.

Seven or eight hundred wounded Union soldiers at this place alone, with nothing to eat but corn in the ear, God's blue sky for covering, a stone for a pillow, and Mother Earth for a bed.

My soldier friend kindled a good fire at my feet, roasted the two ears of corn from which I made my supper, and I soon fell into a sound slumber. I did not awaken until daylight the next morning, when I found sitting at my side one of my own regiment, James Mead of Company F, who had been slightly wounded the day previous. "A friend in need is a friend indeed." Mead had already built a fire at my feet and was making a cup of coffee from the last he had in his haversack, which, with a little hard bread from the same source, made us a good breakfast. He proved to be a most

excellent provider. I don't think he would steal, even from a rebel, but he had what the old soldiers used to call a "terrible long reach," which proved to be of great benefit to me personally.

Breakfast over, I began to look around me. Near by, the surgeons had improvised an operating table, with a barn door for a bed. They lay aside their sashes and tinselled coats, roll up their sleeves, spread wide open the cases filled with the terrible glitter of silver steel, and make ready for the work.

The boys begin to come in from the battlefield, where they had lain all the night before, slowly at first, one boy nursing a shattered arm, another borne by his comrades, a whole load in an ambulance, another on a stretcher, then faster and faster, lying here, lying there, each waiting his terrible turn.

The silver steel grows cloudy and lurid, the knives are busy, the saws play—it is bloody work.

I see pale faces, bloody garments. True right arms that offended by reason of their loyalty to the old flag are lopped like slips of golden willow. Feet that never turned from the foe, for ever more without an owner, strew the ground.

I did not hear a moan—the very silence oppresses me—no sound save the gnawing of those terrible saws. It seemed as if an accent of pain from some weary sufferer would be a welcome sound, and I think of a brave bird, wounded unto death, that I have held in my hand, its keen eye undimmed and full upon me, throbbing with the pain and the dying, and yet so silent.

I retained my headquarters under the apple tree sev-

eral days, Mead and myself alternately in command, when we were loaded into an army wagon with two wounded officers and taken to Dalton, some twelve miles distant, where about four hundred of the Federal prisoners of war were loaded into cattle cars, and the train pulled out for Richmond.

Arriving at Atlanta, we were taken to the prison pen and kept for two days awaiting transportation, when we were again loaded like sheep into cattle cars and shipped to Augusta, where we remained one day. At this place we were not permitted to leave the cars, but were guarded by the citizen soldiery of Augusta, men of sixty years of age and upwards. The young men were all at the front with the Confederate army.

By this time my wounds had become feverish and painful, and learning that the Sisters of Charity had established a hospital in a church near by, I obtained permission from the lieutenant in charge to be taken to the hospital, under guard, and have my wounds cared for. I shall never forget the kindness with which I was received, and the tenderness and care with which my wounds were dressed by these Sisters of Charity. It was the only ray of sunshine that broke through the sombre clouds during all my journey from the battlefield to Richmond. May Heaven bless the Sisters of Charity.

Comrades, how many noble women, both North and South, have threaded like a sunbeam the heavy cloud of war! Women of this nineteenth century, the peers of Rachel and Ruth, and Florence Nightingale. Some one has truthfully said no better epitaph could be placed upon their tombstone than this: "Each soldier's sister,

and each sufferer's friend." When the scenes, amid which we labor and wait, shall have passed into grand eternity of the historic page, the heart of the world will warm to these women of the now re-united states. The womanly deeds of kindness and the deeds of soldierly daring, both North and South, will be blended forever.

We continued our journey, traveling on a free pass furnished by the Confederacy (good only on cattle cars,) to Richmond, via Raleigh, North Carolina. Arriving at Richmond, those of us who were so severely wounded as to be unable to walk from the depot, were loaded on drays and taken to that prison-house of torture and slow death, familiarly known as the "Libby Prison."

On our arrival at the prison our names, rank, regiment, company and place of capture were duly recorded by the clerk, Sergeant Ross, and each one was then searched for money or valuables, and if either was found they were taken by the rebel authorities. The private soldiers were then taken to Belle Isle, and the officers and those slightly wounded were placed in the prison proper, and the remainder were admitted to the hospital.

The hospital at that time was overcrowded, and I was sent to the Pemberton building near by, an adjunct of Libby, where I was assigned a cot, and very soon received medical attention. It was a paradise to what we had experienced, and personally I felt very comfortable.

Upon inquiry I found that each officer was allowed to write two letters every week to friends at home, to contain not more than six lines each. These letters were unsealed and all were examined by the prison authorities, and if found to contain nothing more than a

statement of the condition of the prisoner's health, were sent twice each week by the truce boat to City Point, and delivered to the Federal authorities, but any complaint in regard to harsh treatment, made by the writer, consigned the letters to the waste basket. Letters were also received from our truce boat, addressed to the prisoners of war, opened, examined, and delivered in case they contained no abuse of the confederacy.

A poor, weary sufferer, a lieutenant in a Kansas regiment occupied the cot next to mine. He had been very severely wounded, and a few days before my arrival had suffered the amputation of both feet just above the ankle. He was patient, cheerful, very intelligent, and hopeful that he would recover, but it was apparent to me that he was failing every hour. He talked to me much of his widowed mother, and wondered why he did not hear from her.

One morning I noticed in him a marked change, and on the daily round of the surgeon I asked him if he did not think the lieutenant rapidly failing. He replied, "Yes, he will soon be gone." I said to him, "Lieutenant, you do not seem quite as strong this morning as you did yesterday." "Oh, yes," he replied, "I feel pretty well, but I do so wish I could hear from my mother." I said to him, "Lieutenant, we may neither of us live to see mother or home again. But in case I should survive you and live to return, is there any message you would like to send to your mother?"

He remained silent a moment, then replied in a feeble voice, "Yes! Tell her—tell her, I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and earth, and



LIEUT. COL. L. K. BISHOP,
Grand Rapids, Mich.

in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord." These were his last words, and his spirit had soon gone to dwell with the All-Father, in whom he had so freely trusted. Until then, I never knew the meaning of the words, "Where the wicked cease from troubling, and the weary are at rest." Until then, I never felt the wealth of the assurance, "He giveth his beloved sleep." He knew it not, but his mother was already awaiting his arrival on the shining shore. The surgeon afterward informed me that a letter addressed to the lieutenant had been received, announcing the death of his mother, but, in consequence of his feeble condition, it had not been delivered to him.

But our prison experiences were not all of a gloomy or mournful character. I remember an incident which illustrates what a loyal, liberty-loving, family-worshipping soldier can do in an emergency.

Among the inmates of this hospital was Major Halstead, of a New Jersey regiment. Before the war he was a tailor doing business in the City of New York. He visited my cot frequently and I became well acquainted with him. One day he became very confidential and informed me that he was to start for home the next night. I inquired if he had been exchanged. He replied: "Yes, I have my papers. It is a special exchange and I will tell you confidentially all about it. The surgeon and I are great friends. There is nothing I would not do for him. But for his kindness I should be in the prison. I am entirely well and really have no business in the hospital, but he has taken a fancy to me and allows me to remain here. Indeed, he has been very

kind to me and I feel very grateful to him for all he has done for me, but, under all the circumstances, how can I repay him? I have thought of it for a long time, and said to him a few days ago, "Doctor, I have been trying to think of something I could do for you, to express even in a slight degree, the gratitude I feel for all the kindness you have shown me. With my present surroundings there is only one thing I can do. I am a first-class tailor, and can cut, fit and make as good a suit of clothes as any man living. If you will bring me a good piece of Confederate grey cloth for a full suit—coat, vest and pants—with whatever trimmings you may select, I will gladly take your measure and cut, fit and make the suit with my own hands. He finally accepted my kind offer, brought me a piece of fine Confederate grey cloth, together with the trimmings, shoulder straps, etc. I took his measure and have made the finest Confederate major's uniform you ever saw, *to fit my own dear self*. It is already completed, and I start for home tomorrow night to see my wife and babies."

The next evening he visited my cot, bade me good bye, donned the grey, and passed the sentinel in safety. A few days afterward I received a letter postmarked New York, containing this suggestive announcement: "The tailor is himself again."

The next morning at roll call the major was missing, and the surgeon was mourning the loss of his new uniform and cursing the "d—d Yankees." In consequence of his having been frequently seen at my cot in familiar conversation, I was suspected by the surgeon of having something to do with the disappearance of his

goods and chattels, and informed that I would be removed to the hospital at the Libby prison. I remonstrated with the surgeon, but all to no purpose—to the Libby I was taken under guard.

“Libby Prison” proper was used before the war as a tobacco warehouse. It is a massive brick building, fronting on Cary street, say one hundred and forty feet front by one hundred feet in depth. The front is three stories high, and separated on the first floor into three warehouses, underneath which was a basement. The rear is four stories high, fronting on the canal dock, the canal being on the bank of the James river.

The prison was surrounded on all sides by streets upon which, at intervals of about thirty feet, paced armed sentinels day and night. The first room on the east was devoted to the hospital, the next or middle room was used by the prisoners as a cook room, while the room on the west was used as an office by those in charge of the prison.

In the hospital were four rows of cots, extending the entire length of the room, and at this time they were nearly all occupied by our sick or wounded officers. In one corner of the room a partition had been built, enclosing a small space where the medicines and hospital stores were kept. Underneath was the basement, divided into two rooms, the one fronting on the canal being used as a cook room for the hospital, to which all the inmates had access. The other room, fronting on Cary street and used as a storeroom, was the one from which the tunnel was dug.

We were tolerably well provided for in this hospi-

tal, and at this late day, it is at least charitable to say that they gave us all the attention that it was possible for the Confederacy to furnish.

At this time an arrangement had been made by our government, with the Confederate authorities, by which the United States Christian Commission and friends at the North were permitted to send boxes of food and clothing to our prisoners of war. The boxes were opened by the prison authorities, and, if found to contain nothing contraband of war, were for a time delivered to the parties to whom they were addressed. The contents of the boxes sent by the Christian Commission were divided among those receiving no boxes from home, and the sick and wounded in the hospital, but unfortunately, the delivery of these boxes was soon discontinued, and we were placed on very low diet.

My wounds were healing rapidly, and I soon began to long for liberty. Near me Captain Skelton from Iowa, and Lieutenant Williams from Indiana, occupied cots. They had been for a long time in confinement, and seemed to think of very little else than making their escape. From morning until night, and almost from night to morning, they were busy with some new scheme.

They came to me one day and said, "If you can raise sixty dollars in greenbacks, we three can purchase our liberty by bribing the guard." They had no money, but had been for some time cultivating the acquaintance of the sentinel at the hospital kitchen window, and thought they could trust him. I was invited to join them in an interview with the sentinel. I found him a

bright fellow and evidently not in hearty accord with the Confederacy. Negotiations were made and concluded on the basis of liberty for three, price twenty dollars each in greenbacks.

When captured, I had with me three hundred dollars in twenty dollar treasury notes, which while under the apple tree near the battlefield, I had taken the precaution to have Mead sew into the waistband of my drawers, and at the time I was searched on my arrival at Libby they had escaped seizure, so that I was in funds. I told my comrades that I could furnish them the money, but feared I was not strong enough to endure the exposure of a seventy miles tramp to Williamsburg.

They waited several days for me to gain sufficient strength to undertake the journey, but I finally told them I would not make the venture, but that they could draw on my bank for the necessary funds to enable them to start for God's country, and that very night I gave the sentinel two twenty dollar greenbacks, bade the boys God-speed, and saw them safely pass the guard. Subsequently I met Skelton in Washington. On his arrival there he was discharged from the service in consequence of injuries received at the time of his capture, and at the personal request of President Lincoln he had been given a clerkship in the Treasury Department. Lieutenant Williams immediately joined his regiment at the front.

The next thing was to see that the authorities did not discover their absence until they were safely on their journey. Every morning the clerk of the prison,

Sergeant Ross, came into the hospital and requested each of the inmates to occupy their respective cots while he called the roll. This he did by passing along the aisle between the cots and counting those first on his right hand, and, in returning, those on the opposite side. I had arranged with one of the boys to aid me in keeping the count good. As soon as Ross had passed my cot and I had been counted, I quickly crossed the aisle while his back was turned and stretched myself at full length upon one of the unoccupied cots, so that I was again counted on his return. My associate in this fearful crime pursued the same course, and thus for four days the count was found to be correct.

On the fifth day Ross discovered me and suspected something wrong. The roll was then called by name and Skelton and Williams found to be absent without leave. Having been detected in my endeavor to shield them, I was charged with aiding them to make their escape and was very soon sent for to report to the office to be interrogated by Captain Turner, the commandant of the prison, as to what I knew about it.

I have never been vain enough to suppose that I knew a great deal, but upon that occasion I positively knew less than at any other time in my whole life. Captain Turner became very angry with me, but I tried to keep cool and succeeded for a time, but under continued and terrible abuse my temper finally gave way.

I said to him: "Captain Turner, I am a Union soldier, but by the fortunes of war your prisoner. I am entitled to your protection and not to your abuse. I have committed no crime, I have violated no law, and I

have no apologies nor explanations to make either to you or to your pretended government, and I ask no favors other than those granted to my comrades. You ask me to tell you how Skelton and Williams made their escape and where they now are. I have only this to say. The roll call seems to disclose the fact that they are not here, and while I do not claim to be able to point out to you the exact spot where you will find them, I believe they are now safe under the protecting folds of the Star Spangled Banner, and if I ever have an opportunity to join them I shall most certainly do so without calling at your office and notifying you of my intention."

The captain was disgusted and very angry. Calling the sentinel, he said: "This man needs cooling off! Give him exercise! Set him to walking a crack, and if he don't walk right lively, give him the bayonet," and without further ceremony I was conducted into the hall and told to walk a crack in the floor. I walked; and as I walked I was reminded of the truth of the saying, "Discretion is the better part of valor."

If you have a good thing to say (and it may be the whole truth) wait awhile—it will keep under certain circumstances.

I continued my walk about two hours, and on the return of Captain Turner from dinner he passed near me. Calling to him, I said, "Captain don't you think I have had about enough exercise for one day? You know I did not eat a very hearty breakfast." He deigned to smile, and replied, "Yes, sentinel, take him upstairs." I did not fancy the idea of going into the prison, and said, "Captain, I belong in the hospital." "You have

been there too long already," he replied, "But I would like to get my things." "What things have you in the hospital?" he said. I could think of nothing, as everything I had in the world was on my back. I finally stammered out, "My night shirt." "Night shirt be d—d!" he said, and disappeared.

Arriving on the inside of the prison I found many old friends and acquaintances, and was invited to mess with Col. Heber LeFavour, Capt. A. M. Keeler and Lieutenants A. L. Matthews and Lewis Drake, all of the Twenty-second Michigan Infantry.

There were at this time between ten hundred and eleven hundred officers in the prison, who occupied six rooms, each forty-five by one hundred feet, also the lower middle room which was used as a general kitchen. These rooms were all connected so that we could visit in any part of the prison except the hospital. In the basement under the kitchen was a cell for the confinement of offenders. There were no beds nor chairs, and all slept on the bare floor, with blankets for covering if they were fortunate enough to obtain them. Our bread was made from unsifted cornmeal. We were sometimes furnished with venerable fresh beef—beef so venerable that it ought to have exacted reverence from all beholders. Sometimes we were furnished with vegetable soup and rice; occasionally we had a small piece of bacon issued to us, but it was generally so full of animated life and industry that we could not use it except at a time of great need.

The officers formed themselves into messes, and each one took his turn in preparing such food as we

could obtain. As I have before mentioned, kind friends in the North sent us boxes of food, which, if they were delivered to us, were shared with our more unfortunate comrades.

There was no glass in the windows, and for some time no fire in the rooms, thus making it very cold. The worst difficulty we had to contend with was the vermin, which were ever present with us. They were the most revolting feature of our prison life, and the one to which it was the most difficult to become reconciled. Only by examining our clothing once or twice each day could they be kept from swarming upon us. In the language of Richardson, "for the first few days I could not think of them without shuddering, but in time I learned to make my etomological researches with calm composure."

To improve or kill time we played cards, chess, checkers, opened a theatre, organized a band of minstrels (the best I ever heard), delivered lectures, established schools for teaching the bible, music, dancing, Greek, Latin, German, French, Spanish, mathematics and, in fact, almost everything. Occasionally moot courts would be held, which developed a good deal of originality and wit. Many of the officers became experts in cutting out finger rings, breastpins, crosses, paper knives, etc., from the beef bones extracted from our rations.

A manuscript newspaper was published, which was very amusing.

When one of our number died his remains were placed in an open wagon, in a box of rough boards, and

rapidly drawn over the stony streets. There were no flowers from mourning friends to shed their perfume around and make radiant with their beauty the impressive scene, and there was no mourning pageant; but a thousand loyal hearts in Libby followed the gallant dead to his place of rest.

I soon found that nearly every one was projecting some plan for escape—in fact, I had given the subject some little consideration myself.

An officer from a Connecticut regiment, who had preceded me from the hospital, had a very severe attack of the escape fever. He said to me one day: "I am going to get out of this living hell; will you join me in an attempt to escape?" I replied, "Yes, I am willing to take any reasonable risk for the sake of liberty. What is your scheme?" "I have had several interviews," he said, "with one of the sentinels, and I think he is a safe man. He has agreed to let me out for three silver watches, and I think there will be no difficulty in arranging for you to accompany me. There are some of my officers here who have managed to save their watches from the search, and I can easily borrow them. The sentinel will be on duty tonight at twelve o'clock, and we will have an interview with him."

We met at the appointed time, and I was not long in making up my mind that the sentinel was not the man into whose hands I would be willing to trust my life, and so informed the colonel. But he seemed to have the greatest confidence in him, and upon my refusal to join him in the enterprise he assured me that he should most certainly take the chances.

A few nights afterward he invited me to be at the window and see him off for home. I was on hand at the appointed time and found the colonel with three of his officers, who had loosened two of the iron bars so that he could squeeze through the window. He had made a rope out of his blanket, which was fastened about his body under his arms. We bade him "good bye," and he was lowered one story, by this rope, to the pavement beneath.

He untied the rope, which was drawn back into the prison, and was immediately asked in a low voice by the sentinel, "Where are the watches?" He took them from his pocket and gave them to him. The watches once in his possession, the sentinel brought his musket to the position of "charge bayonet," and said: "You d—d Yankee scoundrel, I will give you just two minutes to get back into the prison."

There was no mistaking the situation. The rope was lowered, the colonel again tied it around his body and was drawn up into the prison, greatly to the amusement of the guard.

Once safely in the prison, I ventured to ask him how he found his friends up in the "Nutmeg State." He good-naturedly replied that, so far as he knew, they were all well, but he wanted one thing distinctly understood—the very next rebel he confided in would be a dead one.

Col. Thomas E. Rose, of the Seventy-seventh Pennsylvania Infantry, than whom no truer, braver man ever lived, was the originator and chief engineer of the celebrated tunnel through which we made our escape,

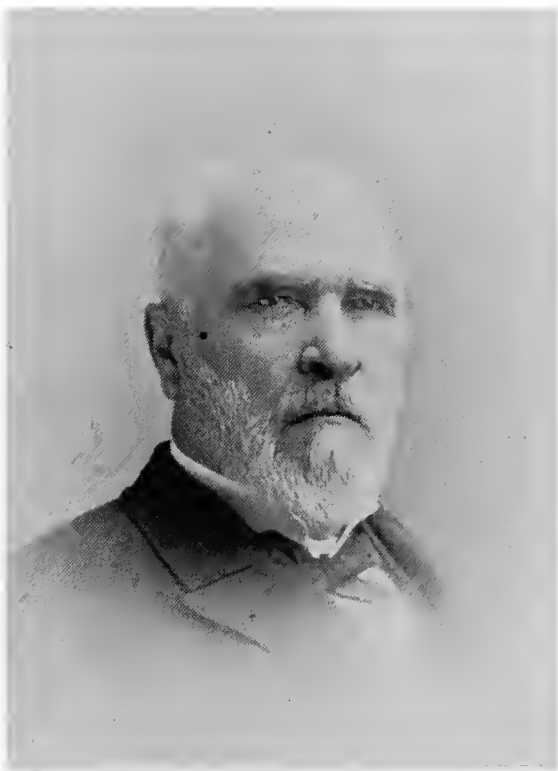
and to him is due the credit of its final success. Others aided in its construction, but he furnished the brain power.

One hundred and nine officers passed through this tunnel, of which number fifty-one reached the Union lines in safety. The remainder were recaptured and returned to Libby.

Our kitchen contained two fire-places and three or four large kitchen stoves upon which we cooked our food. The storeroom underneath the hospital, which I have described, fronted on Cary street, and was so situated that it was possible to reach it by digging downward and rearward through the fire-place and wall. From the basement it was proposed to construct a tunnel under the street to a point beneath a shed which was connected with a brick block on the opposite side, and from this place to pass into the street under an archway.

A knowledge of this plan was confided to about twenty officers, and nothing was known of the proceedings by others until the day before the escape.

A table knife, auger, chisel and wooden spittoon were used for working tools, when operations commenced. Enough of the masonry was removed from the fireplace to admit of the passage of a man, through a diagonal cut, to the storeroom below, and an excavation was then made through the foundation wall toward the street, and the construction of the tunnel then proceeded night by night. But two persons could work at the same time. One would enter the hole with the tools and a small tallow candle, dragging behind him the spittoon attached to a rope. The other would fan air



SURGEON JNO. AVERY,
Greenville. Mich.

into the passage with his hat, and with another string attached to the spittoon, would draw out the dirt-car when loaded, concealing its contents beneath the straw and rubbish of the cellar.

Each morning the working party returned to their quarters, after carefully closing the mouth of the tunnel and skillfully replacing the bricks in the chimney.

As the work progressed and there seemed to be a reasonable prospect of success, it occurred to me that it would be desirable, were I permitted to take a stroll about the outskirts of the city, and learn, if possible, the location of the rebel forces and the lay of the land generally, so that, in the event the tunnel should prove to be a success, I might know how best to make my exit from the city. With this in view I addressed a letter to Mr. Sidden, rebel Secretary of War, stating that I had influential friends at the North who would make any reasonable effort to secure for me a special exchange; such an one as I thought might be advantageous to the Confederacy; and respectfully requested to visit, under guard, General Robert Ould, the Confederate Commissioner of Exchange, where I thought satisfactory arrangements might be made looking in that direction.

A few days after, to my great surprise, I was sent for to report to the office, when Captain Turner, more courteous than when we last met, informed me that he had been instructed by the Secretary of War to send me under guard to General Ould, and inquired if I was ready at that time to go. Replying in the affirmative, I was placed in charge of two soldiers, who received their instructions from Captain Turner. I had plenty of Con-

federate money in my pocket, which I had received from the guard in exchange for greenbacks at the rate of twenty-five dollars for one, and on leaving the prison I made up my mind that, as long as the money lasted I would have a good time with the two rebel soldiers in whose charge I had been placed.

I very speedily made their acquaintance, and on our way to General Ould's headquarters we called at several places where cigars, etc., were kept for sale, and the boys *seemed* to enjoy themselves at my expense. By the time we had arrived at headquarters the guard were in *most excellent spirits* and evidently thought me a pretty good sort of a fellow, even though I was a Yankee. My interview with the general was very pleasant and entirely satisfactory. I was instructed to write to Senator Chandler and others, asking that they intercede with Secretary of War Stanton in my behalf, and after being promised another interview at an early day, the general passed me over to the guard, instructing them to conduct me to the place from whence I came, the then Federal headquarters at Richmond.

I had very little trouble in persuading the guard to return to the prison by a roundabout way through the outskirts of the city, which was to me the objective point. En route we called at the Spotswood Hotel, the principal one in the city where I took a look at many of the "F. F. V's" and Confederate officers. Here the boys regaled themselves for the last time at my expense, and I was soon at home with my loyal mess.

An error occurred in the prosecution of the work on the tunnel which nearly proved fatal to the enterprise.

By a miscalculation a shaft was run to the surface of the ground just before we reached our objective point, and while the officer was working a small amount of the surface earth caved in, and through the opening he could distinctly see two sentinels apparently looking at him. One of them said he had heard strange noises in the ground, but the other replied that it was nothing but rats. The damage was soon repaired by Colonel Rose, and the work proceeded.

The tunnel required about thirty days of patient, tedious and dangerous labor. It was eight feet below the surface of the street, between fifty and sixty feet in length, and barely large enough for a full grown person to crowd or crawl through flat on his face by pulling and pushing with his hands and feet.

A guard was kept each night at the fire-place, the entrance to the storeroom, to see that the scheme was not discovered by our comrades. One night by some mistake, Colonel Hobart had been assigned that duty by one of the party, while I had been assigned to the same duty by another. Everything was very quiet in the kitchen and it was very dark. While upon this duty I heard a noise near the chimney, and cautiously made my way in that direction. Colonel Hobart had made the same discovery. We were both on guard, neither knowing the presence of the other—and we were both loyal to our trust. We grappled at the fire-place, and both went to the floor. Hobart spoke; I recognized his voice; explanations were soon made; he laid down to rest while I continued on duty for the night.

When the tunnel was completed the company was

organized into two parties, one of which was under command of Colonel Rose and the other of Colonel Hobart. Colonel Rose's party was to leave first. Most of the escaping party, among them myself, had provided themselves with citizens' clothing, my own having been sent from home, and, filling our pockets with whatever we could find to eat, we were ready for our journey.

About 7 o'clock on the evening of February 9, 1864, I passed through the tunnel with Major Terrence Clark, of the Seventy-ninth Illinois Infantry, now of Paris, Ill., as my companion. The major preceded me and I found him waiting at the mouth of the tunnel. We locked arms and marched out into the street under the archway near which was burning a bright street gaslight. As we passed out one of the sentinels guarding the prison not sixty feet away, cried out, "Post No. eight, seven o'clock and all is well." We agreed substantially with the sentinel that up to that time all was well. At first we took the center of the street, but gaining confidence in the rectitude of our intentions, we ventured upon the sidewalk. We had not proceeded far when we were ordered by a sentinel, at what proved to be a hospital, to halt, and in reply to his interrogatory, "Who goes there?" I answered, "We are citizens, going home," to which he replied, "Take the middle of the street! You know that no one can walk on this yer' sidewalk in front of this yer' Hospital after dark." We were again in hearty accord with the sentinel, and taking the middle of the street passed directly in front of the hospital without further annoyance.

At the first open lot we left the street and soon

found ourselves in a ravine, through which ran a small stream of water, where we halted a few moments to rest. We soon began to climb a steep hill in our front. The ground was frozen and very slippery. I had not proceeded far when my foot slipped, and I found myself in the creek at the bottom of the hill. Emptying the water from my boots, we made another effort, and arriving at the summit of the hill we found ourselves near what is known as the "Rockets" and in the midst of a Confederate camp of soldiers. We could not well retrace our footsteps, and concluded to pass directly through the camp. No one spoke to us, and as we had no pressing business with any of the Confederate soldiers we did not stop to exchange salutations with them.

We were soon outside the city, and choosing for our guide the north star we pursued our journey. The heavy earthworks erected by the rebels for the better defense of the city during General McClellan's Peninsular campaign were soon passed.

Our object was to cross the Chickahominy as high up as possible, then cross the Yorkville railroad, and follow down near the Williamsburg pike. Of one thing we were certain; if we continued our course between the James and York rivers, and were not molested, we would ultimately reach Fortress Monroe.

We were soon among the trenches in which the Confederates had buried the Union soldiers killed at the battle of Fair Oaks, and, although it was midnight, a strange feeling of security came over us, as if we were among our friends. It was the step and voice of the living that we dreaded.

Before daybreak we had passed the Chickahominy on a fallen tree, and secreting ourselves in a thicket, we lay down on the frozen ground to rest for the day. The weather was cold but we dare not build a fire or stir from our chosen place of concealment.

When night came we pursued our journey, avoiding all houses, clearings and roads, and whenever it became necessary to cross a road we always walked backwards.

Just at daybreak the next morning we thought we could hear the approach of footsteps, and, passing quickly into an old fallen treetop, we fell flat on the ground and awaited developments. A short time elapsed and we saw two figures stealthily approaching. The Major whispered, "There are only two of them, and unless they are armed we can and will dispatch them if they discover and undertake to molest us."

The two men came nearer and nearer to us, and I soon recognized them as Col. H. C. Hobart of the Twenty-first, and Lieut.-Col. T. S. West of the Twenty-fourth Wisconsin Infantry, our fellow prisoners at Libby. We arose from the ground, they quickly recognized us and right there in the valley of the Chickahominy we had a love feast. We then and there agreed that no one of the four should be recaptured while any of the others remained alive.

By this time the entire population had been informed of the escape, and the country was alive with pursuers. We could distinctly hear the *reveille* of the rebel troops and the hum of their camps.

We divided ourselves into reliefs, each one taking

the lead an hour at a time, always traveling in the night and hiding in some thicket during the daytime.

Crossing the railroad from Richmond to the White House, we came upon a rebel sentinel asleep at his post. The morning's dawn brought the notes of the enemy's cavalry to our ears, in the pine forests close by us. We fled into the woods at the top of our speed, expecting every moment to hear the crack of a musket or the sharp command to halt. The only time we looked back was when we about faced to cross a road, and threading our way into a jungle we threw ourselves upon the ground completely exhausted.

As soon as friendly darkness returned we moved forward, weary, hungry and footsore, still governed in our course by the North star. But few words passed between us and we talked only in whispers.

So untiring was the search, and so thoroughly alarmed and watchful were the population that we felt that our safety depended upon a mere chance.

On Saturday night it was the turn of Colonel Hobart to act the part of picket and pilot, and while rapidly leading the way through a forest of low pine we suddenly found ourselves in the presence of a rebel cavalry reserve. The men were warming themselves around a smouldering fire, and their horses were tied to trees around them. Turning to us the colonel gave the signal of danger. Surprised and alarmed, we remained motionless, but perceiving that our presence was unobserved, we very noiselessly withdrew. We knew that there must be videttes sitting somewhere near at the front in the darkness, and to escape discovery we

retraced our steps about two miles to a plantation which we had passed a short time before.

After consultation we decided to visit a negro cabin and, if possible to ascertain the location of the picket line in our front. Colonel Hobart was selected to visit the cabin and interview the inmates, while we lay down upon the ground at the door to listen to what was said. He knocked at the door, and receiving no response lifted the latch. The door opened and an old negro jumped from his bed and inquired: "What do you want?" The colonel replied: "I am a traveler and have lost my way, and am here seeking information." The negro replied: "Go to Massa Dibble at the white house on the hill and he will direct you."

By this time the negro had dressed himself and approaching the colonel, said: "Are you not one of the Union soldiers recently escaped from Richmond?" He replied in an instant: "Yes, I am, and there are three more at the door. We are here because we know that every black man is the friend of the Union soldier and of the cause for which we contend. We are here because we know you will not betray us. We are in trouble and seek information in regard to the rebel picket line. Can you and will you aid us?" "Yes, I can and will," he replied, "but if it should ever be known my life will pay the forfeit. I am a slave and have a wife and two children who look to me for protection. I will do all I can for you, but remember I am in great danger."

After giving us a bowl of milk and a piece of corn bread, he bade us follow him, and leading the way,

brought us to a thicket in the woods, where we sat down on a log and listened to all he had to say. He was intelligent, thoroughly acquainted with every foot of the country, and knew the location of every picket post, but he would not for some time consent to act as our pilot, fearing that he might be discovered. We at last prevailed upon him to go with us, and after following his lead for three miles in silence, he said: "You have now passed the picket line and will soon reach Diascum Creek, which you will cross on the bridge. Once across this bridge, you will be on neutral ground and comparatively safe. Look out for the rebel scouts, who visit the creek every morning."

We gave the negro all the money we had, and bidding him good bye, he started for home and we for the Union lines. If good deeds are recorded in Heaven, this slave's name appeared in the record that night.

We followed the pike until we reached Diascum Creek about daylight Sunday morning. The bridge across the creek had been burned. We tried to wade, but found the water too deep. Our anxiety was increased by the fear that we were discovered by some of the residents who lived in the vicinity. We at length waded waist deep, and on reaching the land found ourselves on an island in the stream, with deep water between us and the mainland.

Expecting every moment to see the enemy's cavalry, we were much disheartened when we saw a rebel soldier coming up the stream in a row boat, with a gun. We concealed ourselves in the bush and took a view of the man. Colonel Hobart accosted him as he approached,

“Good Morning, my friend, I have been waiting for you. They told me up at those houses on the hill that I could get across the stream, but I find the bridge is gone and I am very wet and cold. If you will take me over I will pay you for your trouble.”

The boat was turned in to the shore, the Colonel stepped into it, and we knew it was safe, as we noticed he took up his position very near the musket. He said to the soldier, “There are three more of us,” and we immediately arose and made our way into the boat.

“Where did you all come?” said the boatman, seeming to hesitate and consider. We told him we were farmers residing near Williamsburg, and that we had been down to Richmond with produce and that the government, being in great need, had confiscated our teams, and we were obliged to walk home.

“The officers don’t like to have me carry men over this river,” he said, evidently suspecting who we were. “That is right,” we replied, “you should not carry soldiers or suspicious characters. Pass your boat along.”

With a little assistance it sped to the other shore.

We knew we were discovered, and that the enemy’s cavalry would very soon be in hot pursuit, therefore we determined, after consultation, to go into the first hiding place and as near as possible to the stream. The wisdom of this course was soon demonstrated. The cavalry crossed the stream, dashed by us (we being in a thicket not more than forty rods from the road) and thoroughly searched the country at the front, not dreaming but we had gone forward.



ADJUTANT A. B. MORSE,
Ionia, Mich.

We did not leave our seclusion until nearly midnight, and then felt our way with the greatest care. Our proximity to Williamsburg was apparent from the destruction everywhere in our path. There were no buildings, no inhabitants, and no sound save our own weary footsteps—desolation reigned supreme. Lone bare chimneys stood along our way like sentinels over the dead land, and over the whole scene war had traced its devastating autograph.

For five days and six nights, in midwinter, our feet frost-bitten, with very little to eat, and no fire, hunted and almost exhausted, with the silent stars for our guide, we had picked our way through surrounding perils toward the camp fires of our friends. We knew we were near the outposts of the Union troops, and began to feel as if our trials were nearly over, but we were now in danger of being shot as rebels by scouting parties from our own army.

To avoid the appearance of being spies we took the open road, alternately traveling and concealing ourselves that we might reconnoitre the way.

To my dying day I shall remember that, to me, eventful night. I led the advance, and about 3 o'clock in the morning, coming near the shadow of a dark forest that overhung the road, we were startled and brought to a stand by the sharp command, "Halt!" Looking in the direction whence the command proceeded, I discovered the dark forms of a dozen cavalymen, drawn up in line across the road. A voice came out of the darkness, saying, "Who comes there?" I replied, "We

are four travelers." The same voice said "If you are travelers, come up here and that very quick."

Moving forward the cavalry surrounded us, and carefully looking at their clothing, I at first thought it was grey, and was nerving myself for recapture.

It was a supreme moment to the soul! I at length gathered sufficient courage to inquire, "To what regiment do you belong?"

In broad United States accent the answer came back "To the Eleventh Pennsylvania Calvary."

In an instant their uniforms turned to glorious blue and taking off our hats we gave one long, exultant shout. We were again under the protection of that dear old flag whose every fold is priceless.

It was like passing from death unto life, and our hearts filled with gratitude to Him whose sheltering arm had guided and protected us during all that weary journey.

Colonel McCreery reported to the regiment for duty, about April 1st, 1864. April 11th, 1864, assigned to command of Engineer Brigade, Army of the Cumberland.

First Michigan Engineers (detachment).

Thirteenth Michigan Infantry.

Twenty-First Michigan Infantry.

Twenty-Second Michigan Infantry.

Eighteenth Ohio Infantry.

The total force aggregating 2,940, men and officers. In addition to this command was assigned to duty as "Commandant of Post of Lookout Mountain."

September 14, 1864, resigned on account of disabilities, the result of wounds (six in number) received in various actions with the enemy, while in the discharge of duty.

In the order accepting his resignation, Major General George H. Thomas, commanding army of the Cumberland, said: "In accepting the resignation of Colonel Wm. B. McCreery, the major general commanding takes occasion to express his high appreciation of the soldierly qualities and the faithful discharge of duty, which have ever characterized Colonel McCreery's actions, at the same time regretting the existence of the disability which compels the withdrawal of so valuable an officer from the service."

With the same tireless energy that marked his army life, he entered into the business and political affairs of his city and state. Among the many responsible positions he was called upon to fill are the following: Twice mayor of the city of Flint, collector of internal revenue, under President Grant; twice elected state treasurer; seven years a member of the state board of agriculture; consul to Valparaiso, Chili, under President Harrison. His business affairs were of vast proportions, and in social life a member of the Loyal Legion, the G. A. R. and president of the "Libby Prison Association" and the life president of the 21st Michigan Infantry Association.

"Wind the oak leaves round his head;
He has shown himself a man."

